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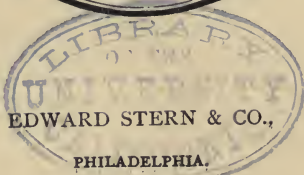
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THE BOOKS OF CHILAN BALAM,

The Prophetic and Historic Records
of the Mayas of Yucatan.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

THE substance of the present pamphlet was presented as an address to the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia, at its meeting in January, 1882, and was printed in the *Penn Monthly*, March, 1882. As the subject is one quite new in the field of American archæology and linguistics, it is believed that a republication in the present form will be welcomed by students of these branches.

THE BOOKS OF CHILAN BALAM.*

CIVILIZATION in ancient America rose to its highest level among the Mayas of Yucatan. Not to speak of the architectural monuments which still remain to attest this, we have the evidence of the earliest missionaries to the fact that they alone, of all the natives of the New World, possessed a literature written in "letters and characters," preserved in volumes neatly bound, the paper manufactured from the bark of a tree and sized with a durable white varnish.†

A few of these books still remain, preserved to us by accident in the great European libraries; but most of them were destroyed by the monks. Their contents were found to relate chiefly to the pagan ritual, to traditions of the heathen times, to astrological superstitions, and the like. Hence, they were considered deleterious, and were burned wherever discovered.

This annihilation of their sacred books affected the natives most keenly, as we are pointedly informed by Bishop Landa, himself one of the most ruthless of Vandals in this respect.‡ But already

* Read before the Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia, at its twenty-fourth annual meeting, January 5th, 1882.

† Of the numerous authorities which could be quoted on this point, I shall give the words of but one, Father Alonso Ponce, the Pope's Commissary-General, who travelled through Yucatan in 1586, when many natives were still living who had been born before the Conquest (1541). Father Ponce had travelled through Mexico, and, of course, had learned about the Aztec picture-writing, which he distinctly contrasts with the writing of the Mayas. Of the latter, he says: "*Son alabados de tres cosas entre todos los demas de la Nueva España, la una de que en su antigüedad tenían caracteres y letras, con que escribían sus historias y las ceremonias y orden de los sacrificios de sus idolos y su calendario, en libros hechos de corteza de cierto arbol, los cuales eran unas tiras muy largas de quarta ó tercia en ancho, que se doblaban y recogían, y venía á quedar á manera de un libro encuadenada en cuartilla, poco mas ó menos. Estas letras y caracteres no las entendían, sino los sacerdotes de los idolos, (que en aquella lengua se llaman 'ahkines,') y algun indio principal. Despues las entendieron y supieron leer algunos frailes nuestros y aun las escribían.*"—"Relacion Breve y Verdadera de Algunas Cosas de las Muchas que Sucedieron al Padre Fray Alonso Ponce, Comisario-General en las Provincias de la Nueva España," page 392). I know no other author who makes the interesting statement that these characters were actually used by the missionaries to impart instruction to the natives; but I learn through Mr. Gatschet, of the Bureau of Ethnology, Washington, that a manuscript written in this manner by one of the early *padres* has recently been discovered.

‡ "*Se les quemamos todos,*" he writes, "*lo qual á maravilla sentían y les dava pena.*"—"Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan," page 316.

some of the more intelligent had learned the Spanish alphabet, and the missionaries had added a sufficient number of signs to it to express with tolerable accuracy the phonetics of the Maya tongue. Relying on their memories, and, no doubt, aided by some manuscripts secretly preserved, many natives set to work to write out in this new alphabet the contents of their ancient records. Much was added which had been brought in by the Europeans, and much omitted which had become unintelligible or obsolete since the Conquest; while, of course, the different writers, varying in skill and knowledge, produced works of very various merit.

Nevertheless, each of these books bore the same name. In whatever village it was written, or by whatever hand, it always was, and to-day still is, called "The Book of Chilán Balam." To distinguish them apart, the name of the village where a copy was found or written, is added. Probably, in the last century, almost every village had one, which was treasured with superstitious veneration. But the opposition of the *padres* to this kind of literature, the decay of ancient sympathies, and especially the long war of races, which since 1847 has desolated so much of the peninsula, have destroyed most of them. There remain, however, either portions or descriptions of not less than sixteen of these curious records. They are known from the names of the villages respectively as the Book of Chilán Balam of Nabula, of Chumayel, of Káua, of Mani, of Oxtutzcab, of Ixil, of Tihosuco, of Tixcocab, etc., these being the names of various native towns in the peninsula.

When I add that not a single one of these has ever been printed, or even entirely translated into any European tongue, it will be evident to every archæologist and linguist what a rich and unexplored mine of information about this interesting people they may present. It is my intention in this article merely to touch upon a few salient points to illustrate this, leaving a thorough discussion of their origin and contents to the future editor who will bring them to the knowledge of the learned world.

Turning first to the meaning of the name "*Chilán Balam*," it is not difficult to find its derivation. "*Chilán*," says Bishop Landa, the second bishop of Yucatan, whose description of the native customs is an invaluable source to us, "was the name of their priests, whose duty it was to teach the sciences, to appoint holy days, to treat the sick, to offer sacrifices, and especially to

utter the oracles of the gods. They were so highly honored by the people that usually they were carried on litters on the shoulders of the devotees." * Strictly speaking, in Maya "*chilan*" means "interpreter," "mouth-piece," from "*chij*," "the mouth," and in this ordinary sense frequently occurs in other writings. The word, "*balam*"—literally, "tiger,"—was also applied to a class of priests, and is still in use among the natives of Yucatan as the designation of the protective spirits of fields and towns, as I have shown at length in a recent study of the word as it occurs in the the native myths of Guatemala.† "*Chilan Balam*," therefore, is not a proper name, but a title, and in ancient times designated the priest who announced the will of the gods and explained the sacred oracles. This accounts for the universality of the name and the sacredness of its associations.

The dates of the books which have come down to us are various. One of them, "The Book of Chilan Balam of Mani," was undoubtedly composed not later than 1595, as is proved by internal evidence. Various passages in the works of Landa, Lizana, Sanchez Aguilar and Cogolludo—all early historians of Yucatan,—prove that many of these native manuscripts existed in the sixteenth century. Several rescripts date from the seventeenth century,—most from the latter half of the eighteenth.

The names of the writers are generally not given, probably because the books, as we have them, are all copies of older manuscripts, with merely the occasional addition of current items of note by the copyist; as, for instance, a malignant epidemic which prevailed in the peninsula in 1673 is mentioned as a present occurrence by the copyist of "The Book of Chilan Balam of Nabula."

* "*Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*," page 160.

† "The Names of the Gods in the Kiche Myths of Central America." Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. XIX., 1881. The terminal letter in both these words—"chilan," "balam,"—may be either "*n*" or "*m*," the change being one of dialect and local pronunciation. I have followed the older authorities in writing "*Chilan Balam*," the modern preferring "*Chilam Balam*." Señor Eligio Ancona, in his recently published "*Historia de Yucatan*," (Vol. I., page 240, note, Merida, 1878,) offers the absurd suggestion that the name "*balam*" was given to the native soothsayers by the early missionaries in ridicule, deriving it from the well-known personage in the Old Testament. It is surprising that Señor Ancona, writing in Merida, had never acquainted himself with the Perez manuscripts, nor with those in the possession of Canon Carrillo. Indeed, the most of his treatment of the ancient history of his country is disappointingly superficial.

I come now to the contents of these curious works. What they contain may conveniently be classified under four headings:

- Astrological and prophetic matters;
- Ancient chronology and history;
- Medical recipes and directions;
- Later history and Christian teachings.

The last-mentioned consist of translations of the "*Doctrina*," Bible stories, narratives of events after the Conquest, etc., which I shall dismiss as of least interest.

The astrology appears partly to be reminiscences of that of their ancient heathendom, partly that borrowed from the European almanacs of the century 1550-1650. These, as is well known, were crammed with predictions and divinations. A careful analysis, based on a comparison with the Spanish almanacs of that time would doubtless reveal how much was taken from them, and it would be fair to presume that the remainder was a survival of ancient native theories.

But there are not wanting actual prophecies of a much more striking character. These were attributed to the ancient priests and to a date long preceding the advent of Christianity. Some of them have been printed in translations in the "*Historias*" of Lizana and Cogolludo, and of some the originals were published by the late Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, in the second volume of the reports of the "*Mission Scientifique au Mexique et dans l'Amérique Centrale*." Their authenticity has been met with considerable skepticism by Waitz and others, particularly as they seem to predict the arrival of the Christians from the East and the introduction of the worship of the cross.

It appears to me that this incredulity is uncalled for. It is known that at the close of each of their larger divisions of time (the so-called "*katuns*,") a "*chilan*," or inspired diviner, uttered a prediction of the character of the year or epoch which was about to begin. Like other would-be prophets, he had doubtless learned that it is wiser to predict evil than good, inasmuch as the probabilities of evil in this worried world of ours outweigh those of good; and when the evil comes his words are remembered to his credit, while, if, perchance, his gloomy forecasts are not realized, no one will bear him a grudge that he has been at fault. The temper of this people was, moreover, gloomy, and it suited them to hear of threatened danger

and destruction by foreign foes. But, alas! for them. The worst that the boding words of the oracle foretold was as nothing to the dire event which overtook them,—the destruction of their nation, their temples and their freedom, 'neath the iron heel of the Spanish conqueror. As the wise Goethe says :

*“ Seltsam ist Prophetenlied,
Doch mehr seltsam was geschieht.”*

As to the supposed reference to the cross and its worship, it may be remarked that the native word translated “ cross,” by the missionaries, simply means “ a piece of wood set upright,” and may well have had a different and special signification in the old days.

By way of a specimen of these prophecies, I quote one from “ The Book of Chilán Balam of Chumayel,” saying at once that for the translation I have depended upon a comparison of the Spanish version of Lizana, who was blindly prejudiced, and that in French of the Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, who knew next to nothing about Maya, with the original. It will be easily understood, therefore, that it is rather a paraphrase than a literal rendering. The original is in short, aphoristic sentences, and was, no doubt, chanted with a rude rhythm :

“ What time the sun shall brightest shine,
Tearful will be the eyes of the king.
Four ages yet shall be inscribed,
Then shall come the holy priest, the holy god.
With grief I speak what now I see.
Watch well the road, ye dwellers in Itza.
The master of the earth shall come to us.
Thus prophesies Nahau Pech, the seer,
In the days of the fourth age,
At the time of its beginning.”



Such are the obscure and ominous words of the ancient oracle. If the date is authentic, it would be about 1480—the “ fourth age ” in the Maya system of computing time being a period of either twenty or twenty-four years at the close of the fifteenth century.

It is, however, of little importance whether these are accurate copies of the ancient prophecies ; they remain, at least, faithful imitations of them, composed in the same spirit and form which the native priests were wont to employ. A number are given much longer than the above, and containing various curious references to ancient usages.

Another value they have in common with all the rest of the text of these books, and it is one which will be properly appreciated by any student of languages. They are, by common consent of all competent authorities, the genuine productions of native minds, cast in the idiomatic forms of the native tongue by those born to its use. No matter how fluent a foreigner becomes in a language not his own, he can never use it as does one who has been familiar with it from childhood. This general maxim is ten-fold true when we apply it to a European learning an American language. The flow of thought, as exhibited in these two linguistic families, is in such different directions that no amount of practice can render one equally accurate in both. Hence the importance of studying a tongue as it is employed by natives; and hence the very high estimate I place on these "Books of Chilán Balam" as linguistic material,—an estimate much increased by the great rarity of independent compositions in their own tongues by members of the native races of this continent.

I now approach what I consider the peculiar value of these records, apart from the linguistic mould in which they are cast; and that is the light they throw upon the chronological system and ancient history of the Mayas. To a limited extent, this has already been brought before the public. The late Don Pio Perez gave to Mr. Stephens, when in Yucatan, an essay on the method of computing time among the ancient Mayas, and also a brief synopsis of Maya history, apparently going back to the third or fourth century of the Christian era. Both were published by Mr. Stephens in the appendix to his "Travels in Yucatan," and have appeared repeatedly since in English, Spanish and French.* They have, up to the present, constituted almost our sole sources of information on these interesting points. Don Pio Perez was rather vague as to whence he derived his knowledge. He refers to "ancient manuscripts," "old authorities," and the like; but, as the Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg justly complains, he rarely quotes their words,

* For example, in the "*Registro Yucateco*," *Tome III.*; "*Diccionario Universal de Historia y Geografía*," *Tome VIII.* (Mexico, 1855); "*Diccionario Historico de Yucatan*," *Tome I.* (Merida, 1866); in the appendix to Landa's "*Cosas de Yucatan*" (Paris, 1864), etc. The epochs, or *katuns*, of Maya history have been recently again analyzed by Dr. Felipe Valentini, in an essay in the German and English languages, the latter in the "Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 1880."

and gives no descriptions as to what they were or how he gained access to them.* In fact, the whole of Señor Perez's information was derived from these "Books of Chilan Balam;" and, without wishing at all to detract from his reputation as an antiquary and a Maya scholar, I am obliged to say that he has dealt with them as scholars so often do with their authorities; that is, having framed his theories, he quoted what he found in their favor and neglected to refer to what he observed was against them.

Thus, it is a cardinal question in Yucatecan archæology as to whether the epoch or age by which the great cycle (the *ahau katus*,) was reckoned, embraced twenty or twenty-four years. Contrary to all the Spanish authorities, Perez declared for twenty-four years, supporting himself by "the manuscripts." It is true there are three of the "Books of Chilan Balam"—those of Mani, Káua and Oxkutzcab,—which are distinctly in favor of twenty-four years; but, on the other hand, there are four or five others which are clearly for the period of twenty years, and of these Don Perez said nothing, although copies of more than one of them were in his library. So of the epochs, or *katuns*, of Maya history; there are three or more copies in these books which he does not seem to have compared with the one he furnished Stephens. His labor will have to be repeated according to the methods of modern criticism, and with the additional material obtained since he wrote.

Another valuable feature in these records is the hints they furnish of the hieroglyphic system of the Mayas. Almost our only authority heretofore has been the essay of Landa. It has suffered somewhat in credit because we had no means of verifying his statements and comparing the characters he gives. Dr. Valentini has even gone so far as to attack some of his assertions as "fabrications." This is an amount of skepticism which exceeds both justice and probability.

The chronological portions of the "Books of Chilan Balam" are partly written with the ancient signs of the days, months and epochs, and they furnish us, also, delineations of the "wheels" which the natives used for computing time. The former are so important to the student of Maya hieroglyphics, that I have added photographic reproductions of them to this paper, giving also representations of

* The Abbé's criticism occurs in the note to page 406 of his edition of Landa's "*Cosas de Yucatan*."



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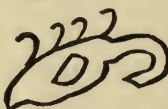
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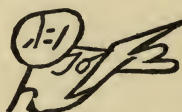
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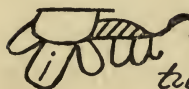
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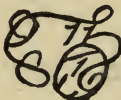
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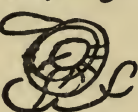
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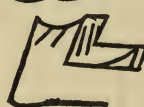
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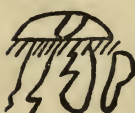
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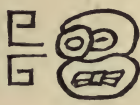















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VI.] 	Octubre 24 YAXKIN	XV.] 	Abril 22 PAX
VII.] 	Noviembre 13 MOL	XVI.] 	Mayo 12 KAYAB
VIII.] 	Diciembre 3 CHEN	XVII.] 	Junio 1 CUMKU
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those of Landa for comparison. It will be observed that the signs of the days are distinctly similar in the majority of cases, but that those of the months are hardly alike.

The hieroglyphs of the days taken from the "*Codex Troano*," an ancient Maya book written before the Conquest, probably about 1400, are also added to illustrate the variations which occurred in the hands of different scribes. Those from the "Books of Chilan Balam" are copied from a manuscript known to Maya scholars as the "*Codice Perez*," of undoubted authenticity and antiquity.*

The result of the comparison I thus institute is a triumphant refutation of the doubts and slurs which have been cast on Bishop Landa's work and vindicate for it a very high degree of accuracy.

The hieroglyphics for the months are quite complicated, and in the "Books of Chilan Balam" are rudely drawn; but, for all that, two or three of them are evidently identical with those in the calendar preserved by Landa. Some years ago, Professor de Rosny expressed himself in great doubt as to the fidelity in the tracing of these hieroglyphs of the months, principally because he could not find them in the two codices at his command.† As he observes, they are *composite* signs, and this goes to explain the discrepancy; for it may be regarded as established that the Maya script permitted the use of several signs for the same sound, and the sculptor or scribe was not obliged to represent the same word always by the same figure.

In close relation to chronology is the system of numeration and the arithmetical signs. These are discussed with considerable fullness, especially in the "Book of Chilan Balam of Káua." The numerals are represented by exactly the same figures as we find in the Maya manuscripts of the libraries of Dresden, Pesth, Paris and Madrid; that is, by points or dots up to five, and the fives by single straight lines, which may be indiscriminately drawn vertically or horizontally. The same book contains a table of multiplication in

* It is described at length by Don Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona, in his "*Disertacion sobre la Historia de la Lengua Maya*" (Merida, 1870).

† "Je dois déclarer que l'examen dans tous leurs détails du '*Codex Troano*' et du '*Codex Peresianus*' m'invite de la façon la plus sérieuse à n'accepter ces signes, tout au moins au point de vue de l'exactitude de leur tracé, qu'avec une certaine réserve."—Leon de Rosny's "*Essai sur le Déciffrement de l'Écriture Hiératique de l'Amérique Centrale*," page 21 (Paris, 1876). By the "*Codex Peresianus*," he does not mean the "*Codice Perez*," but the Maya manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale. The identity of the names is confusing and unfortunate.

Spanish and Maya which settles some disputed points in the use of the vigesimal system by the Mayas.

A curious chapter in several of the books, especially those of Káua and Mani, is that on the thirteen *ahau katuns*, or epochs of the greater cycle of the Mayas. This cycle embraced thirteen periods, which, as I have before remarked, are computed by some at twenty years each, by others at twenty-four years each. Each of these *katuns* was presided over by a chief or king, that being the meaning of the word *ahau*. The books above-mentioned give both the name and the portrait, drawn and colored by the rude hand of the native artist, of each of these kings, and they suggest several interesting analogies.

They are, in the first place, identical, with one exception, with those on an ancient native painting, an engraving of which is given by Father Cogolludo in his "History of Yucatan," and explained by him as the representation of an occurrence which took place after the Spaniards arrived in the peninsula. Evidently, the native in whose hands the worthy father found it, fearing that he partook of the fanaticism which had led the missionaries to the destruction of so many records of the nation, deceived him as to its purport, and gave him an explanation which imported to the scroll the character of a harmless history.

The one exception is the last or thirteenth chief. Cogolludo appends to this the name of an Indian who probably did fall a victim to his friendship to the Spaniards. This name, as a sort of guarantee for the rest of his story, the native scribe inserted in place of the genuine one. The peculiarity of the figure is that it has an arrow or dagger driven into its eye. Not only is this mentioned by Cogolludo's informant, but it is represented in the paintings in both the "Books of Chilán Balam" above noted, and also, by a fortunate coincidence, in one of the calendar-pages of the "*Codex Troano*," plate xxiii., in a remarkable cartouche, which, from a wholly independent course of reasoning, was some time since identified by my esteemed correspondent, Professor Cyrus Thomas, of Illinois, as a cartouche of one of the *ahau katuns*, and probably of the last of them. It gives me much pleasure to add such conclusive proof of the sagacity of his supposition.*

* "The Manuscript Troano," published in *The American Naturalist*, August, 1881, page 640. This manuscript or codex was published in chromo-lithograph, Paris, 1879, by the French Government.

Cod. 770

5 Kan	12 Kan	6 Kan	13 Kan	
6 Chichan	13 Chichan	7 Chichan	1 Chichan	
7 Cimiy ? talog no sé"??	1 Cimiy	8 Cimiy	2 Cimiy	
8 Manik	2 Manik	9 Manik	3 Manik	
9 Samat	3 Samat	10 Samat	4 Samat	
10 Muluc	4 Muluc	11 Muluc	5 Muluc	
11 Oc	5 Oc	12 Oc	6 Oc	
12 Chuen	6 Chuen	13 Chuen	7 Chuen	
13 Eb	7 Eb	1 Eb	8 Eb	
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	2 Hiix		9 Hiix		3 Hiix		10 Hiix	
	3 Men		10 Men		4 Men		11 Men	
	4 Cib		11 Cib		5 Cib		12 Cib	
	5 Caban		12 Caban		6 Caban		13 Caban	
	6 Eonab		13 Eonab		7 Eonab		1 Eonab	
	7 Cauac		1 Cauac		8 Cauac		2 Cauac	
	8 Ahau		2 Ahau		9 Ahau		3 Ahau	
	9 Ymix		3 Ymix		10 Ymix		4 Ymix	
	10 Yk		4 Yk		11 Yk		5 Yk	
	11 Akbal		5 Akbal		12 Akbal		6 Akbal	

ad 1 Codice Perez pag^s 95-99.

SIGNS OF THE DAYS.

The first column on the right is from Landa. The second is from the "Codex Troano." The remaining four are from the Book of Chilam Balam of Káau.

There is other evidence to show that the engraving in Cogoludo is a relic of the purest ancient Maya symbolism,—one of the most interesting which have been preserved to us; but to enter upon its explanation in this connection would be too far from my present topic.

A favorite theme with the writers of the “Books of Chilan Balam” was the cure of diseases. Bishop Landa explains the “*chilanes*” as “sorcerers and doctors,” and adds that one of their prominent duties was to diagnose diseases and point out their appropriate remedies.* As we might expect, therefore, considerable prominence is given to the description of symptoms and suggestions for their alleviation. Bleeding and the administration of preparations of native plants are the usual prescriptions; but there are others which have probably been borrowed from some domestic medicine-book of European origin.

The late Don Pio Perez gave a great deal of attention to collecting these native recipes, and his manuscripts were carefully examined by Dr. Berendt, who combined all the necessary knowledge, botanical, linguistic and medical, and who has left a large manuscript, entitled “*Recetarios de Indios*,” which presents the subject fully. He considers the scientific value of these remedies to be next to nothing, and the language in which they are recorded to be distinctly inferior to that of the remainder of the “Books of Chilan Balam.” Hence, he believes that this portion of the ancient records was supplanted some time in the last century by medical notions introduced from European sources. Such, in fact, is the statement of the copyists of the books themselves, as these recipes, etc., are sometimes found in a separate volume, entitled “The Book of the Jew,”—“*El Libro del Judío*.” Who this alleged Jewish physician was, who left so wide-spread and durable a renown among the Yucatecan natives, none of the archæologists has been able to find out.†

The language and style of most of these books are aphoristic,

* “*Declarar las necesidades y sus remedios*.”—“*Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*,” page 160. Like much of Landa’s Spanish, this use of the word “*necesidad*” is colloquial, and not classical.

† A “*Medicina Domestica*,” under the name of “Don Ricardo Ossado, (alias, *el Judío*),” was published at Merida in 1834; but this appears to have been merely a bookseller’s device to aid the sale of the book by attributing it to the “great unknown.”

elliptical and obscure. The Maya language has naturally undergone considerable alteration since they were written ; therefore, even to competent readers of ordinary Maya, they are not readily understood. Fortunately, however, there are in existence excellent dictionaries of the Maya of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which, were they published, would be sufficient for this purpose.

A few persons in Yucatan have appreciated the desirability of collecting and preserving these works. Don Pio Perez was the first to do so, and of living Yucatecan scholars particular mention should be made of the Rev. Canon Don Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona, who has written a good, and I believe the only, description of them which has yet appeared in print.* They attracted the earnest attention of that eminent naturalist and ethnologist, the late Dr. C. Hermann Berendt, and at a great expenditure of time and labor he visited various parts of Yucatan, and with remarkable skill made *fac-simile* copies of the most important and complete specimens which he could anywhere find. This invaluable and unique collection has come into my hands since his death, and it is this which has prompted me to make known their character and contents to those interested in such subjects.

* In his "*Disertacion sobre la Historia de la Lengua Maya ó Yucateca*" (Merida, 1870).

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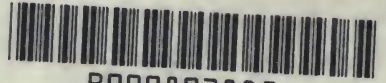
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